

WHO NEEDS AN AGENDA?

Unconference organizers Dennis Kuba, (left) vice president of advanced technology in Disney's Corporate New Technology Group and Mike Pusateri, senior vice president of technology for the Disney/ABC Television Group



BY BOB ANDELMAN

Toss

RIGID AGENDAS AND TALKING HEADS TAKE A BACK SEAT AT **DISNEY'S UNSTRUCTURED, UNCONVENTIONAL, UNCONFERENCE.**

THE TOPIC OF the session he was in charge of facilitating was: "E-mail Sucks!"

That was how Ben Christen, manager of technology at Walt Disney Internet Group in Burbank, Calif., knew that this was going to be no ordinary meeting.

"It was a little surreal," says Christen, one of 135 employees who gathered for the division's second unconference (known as "Pooh Camp"), held in March at Disney's Golden Oaks Ranch, north of Los Angeles. The company's goal: to loosen the collars and free the flow of discussion among the entertainment monolith's tech experts.

Pooh Camp is a play on the name of the unconference that inspired it: O'Reilly Media's "Friends of O'Reilly" event—or Foo Camp, for short. It's part of a growing wave of like-minded, chaotic ventures with names such as "Mash-up Camp," "BarCamp," and "BrainJams" that are shaking up the geek meeting world.

For Disney, it all started a couple of years ago when Mike Pusateri, senior vice president of technology for the Disney/ABC Television Group, "came to us very excited from his Foo Camp experience with the O'Reilly folks," says Dennis Kuba, vice president of advanced technology in Disney's Corporate New Technology Department. "He encouraged us to do [our own] version of that. Our department organizes a number of enterprise-level tech gatherings for the company. We have, for example, a quarterly New Technology Forum that gathers 200 to 800 new media technology executives. We bring in industry speakers and highlight technologies. The idea that Mike brought was interesting because it was the polar opposite of that. Instead of us planning it, it plans itself." >>

PHOTO BY JEFFREY BRAVERMAN



Pick Your Topic

Attendees arrived at the Golden Oaks Ranch to find 16 blank whiteboards set in semicircles under a stand of majestic trees. People were expected to write down the topics they wanted to lead, and then convene with others interested in those topics for a set time period.

The blank whiteboards were a sign, in a way, that the whole thing could go horribly wrong. Maybe no one would sign up to lead a meeting. Or maybe everyone wanted to lead, and no one wanted to follow. Or maybe the people stepping forward had an ax to grind.

Fortunately for Pusateri and Kuba,

everyone there genuinely wanted to push the company forward in frank, positive ways. “Worrying about the topics and filling them up *was* a great discussion before we started,” Pusateri says. “But ultimately, that was never an issue. The real issue was, ‘there are two [sessions happening] at the same time; I wanted to go to *both* of them.’”

“A few topics I looked at and said, ‘That sounds boring as hell, I don’t want to go to that!’” Pusateri admits.

To their credit, most of the people who signed up to lead Pooh Camp sessions came prepared to drop multiple thought bombs on their associates from

Disney’s many represented business divisions. While the Disney company looks like one entity from the outside, it’s really many companies and businesses, ranging from Walt Disney World and Disneyland to Buena Vista Music, Cable Networks Group (including ESPN and ABC Family), Disney Interactive Studios, Walt Disney Imagineering, ABC TV in New York, and many more. Not everyone in this vast organization knows their counterparts in other parts of the company. Yet these people can be resources to one another, a fact that was largely unaddressed until they were introduced—accidentally-on-purpose—at Pooh Camp.

At the 800-acre private ranch, where dozens of films, from *Old Yeller* to *Independence Day*, have been filmed, attendees were in for a 12-hour day

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—Doug Parrish, chief technology officer, Disney Internet Group

that started at 8 a.m. and finished three meals and many breakouts later. The first Pooh Camp, held in 2006, could have had twice as many attendees and twice as many presentations, so this year’s organizers nearly doubled attendance, from 75 to 135, and tripled the number of presentation slots, from 39 to more than 100.

Camp organizers put the old ranch to work in a number of ways. There were meetings in Disney’s cabin and on the back patio, and the Golden Oak Hall was split into four spaces. A ship’s bell clanged to start and finish the dozen or more simultaneous sessions, each allotted an hour. Between meals, tables in the mess hall tent were taken over by scheduled, as well as impromptu, discussions. Even during meals, almost every table had a theme; at lunch, a discussion of Apple Inc. drew more people than there were seats available.



SIGN ME UP!

The unconference model lets attendees come up with the ideas for the sessions and sign up for the ones that they want to attend.

BOB ANDELMAN

Another sign that this wasn't your typical meeting: The cybernetics folks unleashed a flying mechanical dragonfly in the tent with this warning: "If you treat your robot nice, he'll play with you nice. If you're aggressive, he'll bite you."

But Back to "E-mail Sucks!"

Ben Christen doesn't really think that e-mail sucks. But he doesn't think that it's the best solution for all of a corporation's communications needs—and that's really his point. Seated in a comfortable upholstered chair, iBook in his lap, Wi-Fi Internet access in the air, and the audience's rapt attention on the screen where his PowerPoint presentation appeared, Christen wanted his fellow cast members to think about alternatives.

"E-mail is too inclusive—and too exclusive," he began. "If someone joins your team later on, they don't have access to the information you previously shared in e-mail." As Christen shared his ideas for solving the e-mail quandary, other conversations were happening in the room. A woman at the dining room table answered e-mail on her laptop. A man perched on the kitchen island whispered to another attendee about something provocative that Christen had said.

Outside the kitchen window, another group gathered for a completely different purpose: Split into two teams, the attendees had to silently yet cooperatively build structures for transporting materials with brightly colored Legos. By design, this was one of the only recurring sessions, intended so that everyone had a shot at it.

Doug Parrish is chief technology officer for the Walt Disney Internet Group. He signed up to lead a discussion on digital rights management, titled "Does DRM Matter Anymore?" He thought there might be one person in attendance; there were 30. "Pooh Camp lets us be less reverent about topics," he says. "And some of the more successful topics are the contrarians."

Meanwhile, in Golden Oak Hall, an interactive presentation on the cost of media piracy opened many eyes. In a casual, relaxed presentation, the speaker made his point. As in most of the ses-

Hot Topics at Pooh Camp

With no facilitator screening topics, Disney leaves itself unusually wide open at this unconference, as you can see from the range of sessions offered by attendees:

Session 1	In-Car PCs: Content on the Road
Session 2	Pixie Dust to Pixie Digits: Digitizing the WD Archives?
Session 3	Why Avoiding Risk Is Risky: Managing Risk for Innovation
Session 4	How Do You Guys and Gals in R&D Decide What You Will Work On?
Session 5	Knowing 'No': The 'No' and How to Get Around It!
Session 6	The Digital Buffet Business Model: Why Disney Should Stop Selling Content
Session 7	"Apple Inc.: Sucks or Rocks?"



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sions, it was more of a conversation and less of a lecture, although most speakers arrived with slides and, most important, knowledge to impart.

Pooh's Thotful Spot

The Disney organization is generally known for two things: creativity and rigid adherence to a structured environment. For one day, Pooh Camp embraces the former and tosses the latter out on its haunches. "It's the thinnest possible layer of organization—and people seem OK with it," says Pusateri.

The typical Disney meeting, he said, is scripted down to what table and seat a person is assigned to for meals. Pooh Camp, while not as loosey-goosey as Fo Camp, is pretty freewheeling.

Pusateri is responsible for bringing a lot of technologies and new ideas, such as the unconference, into the Disney culture. "The first one of these was taken on faith; if it failed, it was on us," he says.

You don't have any incentive to meet the other people in the room. Sometimes, when you let people feel that they're in control, they achieve more. In this format, people introduce themselves. It leads to the people connection."

Like other unconference advocates, Pusateri believes the minutes before and after scheduled business are probably the most creative, most constructive time for attendees. He doesn't advocate doing away with traditional meetings, but he would love to see an integration of un-conferences and traditional meetings for a wider swath of Disney's cast members.

"I could see doing it every six months," he said. "But my suggestion is that we limit the repeat factor and bring in new people, empowering them to do their own local version of Pooh Camp, maybe just have 25 people sitting around at lunch.

"I want it to be acceptable within Disney to approach meetings a little dif-

"It took a big leap of faith for my bosses that this would work and that people would engage. They had a million concerns."

—Mike Pusateri, senior vice president of technology,
Disney/ABC Television Group

A noteworthy difference in this Pooh Camp over its predecessor is that there were few, if any, lightly attended sessions. "Last year," Pusateri says, "there were a couple sessions where only three or four people showed up, which made the person giving the session feel bad. Nothing like that has happened this year."

Pusateri believes in the unconference format so much that he staked a piece of his reputation on its ability to get results. "Quarterly, we have new technology meetings," he says. "They are carefully choreographed; the speakers, for example, have countdown clocks. But before those meetings begin, everybody is chatting. Then conversation is quashed for the formal presentation.

ferently," he adds. "For a time we were so formal and rigid. But that's *not* what our company was originally about. Our company was about Walt Disney hanging out with guys and coming up with better ideas to make movies. It's not about spreadsheets." During the Eisner era, he notes, the cultural tone was different. "It was secretive, guarded. 'Don't share!'

"By coming very much away from our normal meeting space, it reinforces that this is different from the norm. It's OK to be different. Innovation is not forced. It's serendipitous."

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SAY CHEESE!

Attendees lined up in the shape of Mickey Mouse Ears for an aerial photo. (Pusateri, with the megaphone, is in the foreground.)



pany, Disney included.

“People here *do* like to know everything in advance,” Pusateri admits. “They expect the structure they’re used to. It took a big leap of faith for my bosses that this would work and that people would engage. They had a million concerns, but they put their faith in it.”

One way they kept it under control was to set up a wiki when the meeting

was announced, not just to describe the event but to capture what kind of sessions people were planning to bring. “People were putting up ideas almost daily,” Pusateri says. “We could see the agenda building as we got closer to the event.”

In other words, planned chaos.

“The wiki gave people a place to put the things they were interested in,” Pusateri says. “But the agenda wasn’t set-

tled until the day of the camp when people went and wrote their plans down. Some people may have come intending to speak, but then they saw the agendas and decided to just participate.”

People were asked to bring supporting information for their presentations, no holds barred, but “we asked people *not* to bring their standard PowerPoint presentations,” Kuba said. “We wanted to be interactive, and we wanted fun.”

And they got it, with activities including an obstacle course with a fleet of four Segway electric vehicles and a Nintendo Wii gaming center where attendees could play games on the year’s hottest game console. Yet, it was also practical: Disney Interactive Studios is designing games for the Wii platform. After lunch, everyone was herded out to an open meadow and directed to lie flat for a group photo ... in the shape of Mickey Mouse ears ... shot overhead ... from a helicopter.

Future Poohs?

The big question going forward is not if Disney will hold another Pooh Camp, but who should attend. One thought Kuba has is to ask former Pooh Camp attendees to recommend co-workers who would benefit from the experience. Another thought is to use the camp for a specific goal, such as developing a new product or marketing plan.

One challenge has been to measure the success or failure of Pooh Camp.

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“The issue a lot of people have is there is no specific deliverable—marketing, for example,” says Pusateri. “In this meeting, it’s hard to have that outcome. If the Disney Archives people and the Disney management people solved a problem, there *is* a benefit. But it has to start with the individuals.

“I think the biggest payoff we heard from people,” he adds, “was that it was a good chance to get out of their silos. There aren’t many opportunities for people to interact with other people around the company, to see what’s going on in other business units.”

Though the organizers do a post-event survey, “we don’t have a metric for something like this,” Kuba says. “A lot of it is subjective. A success is that they got out of it what they wanted to learn about. If we get even a small number of those things happening, you can consider it a success. And if people find value in it, we’ll continue.” ■

Unconference Basics

How long have unconferences been around?

For more than 20 years, they have been used in other contexts, such as Future workshops.

What’s the ideal size for an unconference?

These meetings can be any size, but at least 20 people is best, since attendees break into smaller groups.

Is it true that there’s no agenda?

Yes. Those coming to the event can post on a wiki ahead of time the topics they want to present about or hope others will present about, so there’s a sense of what will be discussed, but that can change at any moment.

How long do the breakout sessions last?

Sessions typically last at least an hour.

What kind of group is this suited for?

Any group could benefit, but to date unconferences have primarily been used in the geek community.

Source: Wikipedia

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